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# *I (Don't) Hear America Singing: The List of Songs Americans Should Know and Sing<sup>1</sup>*

Melinda Russell

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- 1 In this paper I discuss an instance in which US musical culture was diagnosed, as it were, with an illness, and a prescription was suggested for its cure. I explore the range of responses to the diagnosis and the prescription, locating in them some of the central contentions of American musical culture.
- 2 In the July 1995 *Music Educators Journal*, Music Educators National Conference (MENC, now the National Association for Music Education) President Will Schmid asked his readers, "Remember Rachel Carson's landmark book *Silent Spring*? It raised the specter of a spring where birds, killed off by pesticides, did not sing anymore. "Well," he continued, "a lot of music teachers are starting to worry about whether people are singing any more (sic). They meet increasing numbers of adults who call themselves non-singers, children who enter kindergarten without having experienced family singing, and teenagers who would rather slap on earphones than sing."
- 3 This bleak state of affairs thus outlined, Schmid went on to assure readers that "MENC and its affiliated organization are developing a plan to do something about this predicament," and indeed that a team had already been assembled, comprising representatives from MENC and SPEBSQSA (Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barber Shop Quartet Singing in America), who had then invited representatives from Chorus America, Sweet Adelines International, and the American Choral Directors Association. After "considerable discussion," Schmid outlined, "we decided to launch a campaign to 'Get America Singing...Again!'"
- 4 The campaign would have two main objectives, wrote Schmid. The first would be to "establish a common song repertoire that 'Americans, of all ages, know and can sing. '" This repertoire list would result from a committee reviewing lists drawn up by each of the organizations represented in the meeting. Schmid envisioned the final list as one

containing fifteen to twenty-four songs, which should include “not just the good old traditional songs,” but also “copyrighted songs written since the 1950s.” The second objective of the “Get America Singing...Again!” campaign would be to “to promote community singing,” including having audiences sing at concerts, “asking people at public gatherings to open or close the festivities with a song, and encouraging singing at club or private meetings.” Members could get started immediately, suggested Schmid, by “build(ing) up the common life of singing in your community.”<sup>2</sup>

5 The result was that in 1996, Hal Leonard published *Get America Singing...Again! Sing America! A project of the Music Educators National Conference*,<sup>3</sup> containing the forty-two songs had which survived a “year-long process of sifting.” The book’s cover features, below its title, an illustration with a large American flag, in front of which stand five people. They are at the top of a hill covered in amber grasses. All appear white. A bespectacled young man, wearing trousers with a button-down shirt and t-shirt is playing guitar. To his right stands a short-haired woman in a blue skirt, and to his left are three figures. The first is a younger woman in a white or tan dress, and next to her are a young boy and girl, with the former in jeans and a short-sleeved t-shirt and the latter in a skirt (perhaps with shorts underneath). All have their mouths open in song. The iconography is simultaneously reminiscent both of Joe Rosenthal’s famed photograph of marines planting the American flag on Mount Surabachi and of the Coca Cola “Hilltop” commercial of the early 1970s.<sup>4</sup>

6 The book contains forty-three<sup>5</sup> songs:

7 Amazing Grace

8 America (My Country 'Tis of Thee)

9 America the Beautiful

10 Battle Hymn of the Republic

11 Blue Skies

12 Danny Boy

13 De Colores

14 Dona Nobis Pacem

15 Do-Re-Mi

16 Down by the Riverside

17 Frere Jacques

18 Give My Regards to Broadway

19 God Bless America

20 God Bless the U.S.A.

21 Green, Green Grass of Home

22 Havah Nagilah

23 He's Got the Whole World in His Hands

24 Home on the Range

25 I've Been Working on the Railroad

26 If I Had a Hammer

27 Let There be Peace on Earth

28 Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing

- 29 Michael (Row the Boat Ashore)
- 30 Music Alone Shall Live
- 31 My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean
- 32 Oh! Susanna
- 33 Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'
- 34 Over My Head
- 35 Puff the Magic Dragon
- 36 Rock-A-My Soul
- 37 Sakura
- 38 Shalom Chaverim
- 39 She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain
- 40 Shenandoah
- 41 Simple Gifts
- 42 Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child
- 43 The Star-Spangled Banner
- 44 Swing Low, Sweet Chariot
- 45 Take Me Out to the Ball Game
- 46 This Land is Your Land
- 47 This Little Light of Mine
- 48 Yesterday
- 49 Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah

- 50 The book contains an introduction by Schmid that repeats the "*Silent Spring*" paragraph quoted above. Following the "teenagers who would rather slap on earphones than sing," however, he adds "What is at stake here is not just singing, but the very spirit of community in our towns, our cities, and our nation. But...something can be done about it, and this book is a response to that need."<sup>6</sup> Preceding Schmid's introduction is a foreword by folksinger Pete Seeger, who was named the Honorary National Chair of the "Get America Singing...Again! Campaign."<sup>7</sup> I quote it in full below:

If there's a human race still here in the 22<sup>nd</sup> Century, I believe we'll learn the fun of singing again. To take a lung full of air and push it out with some kind of song is an act of survival, whether you're singing in a shower, a car, a bar, in a chorus, at a birthday party, at a church, or wherever. Try it – you'll live longer.

Of course, it'll be much harder to find songs all folks want to sing together, but that's alright (sic). Little by little, we're learning to like each other's songs and getting less enthusiastic about killing each other. And if there's still a human race here in 100 years, it won't be because of any one big organization, whether a big church or a big political party, a big corporation or country, or even a big UN. It will be because of millions upon millions of small organizations: *Save This. Stop That.* We'll disagree about so many things it'll be funny. But we'll agree on a few main points, like:

- It's better to talk than shoot
- Bombs always kill innocent people
- When words fail (and they will), try sports, arts, and food

And industrialized, polluted, TV-addicted people will learn to sing again. Hooray!<sup>8</sup>

- 51 The Music Educators National Conference released to the public its diagnosis and suggested a cure. Quoted in the press, where the list was widely published, MENC president Will Schmid lamented that “(m)ost parents don’t sing to their children anymore. Not even lullabies ...There’s a whole generation of kids growing up who never sang at home and who don’t know songs...not even the nation’s patriotic songs, except for the national anthem which they hear at the start of sporting events. They don’t sing; they watch television.”<sup>9</sup> In volunteering its diagnosis of a “singing deficiency” in American culture, and in prescribing 42<sup>10</sup> songs to cure it, the Music Educators National Conference sparked at least some degree of debate across the country. Without doubt, most of this debate consists of conversations of which no trace remains, but—happily—parts appeared in newspapers and periodicals. While it was fragmented and short-lived, the debate provides an interesting instance of self-assessment in US musical culture. In hailing, deriding, or amending the MENC list, writers took on the provocative questions of whether America has, or should have, a shared musical culture; who should decide on an answer to that question; and of what such a shared culture might consist. The first portion of this paper presents the substance of that discussion. The next analyzes parts of the debate, turning to the responses offered by various members of the U.S. public, as they relate to the twin aims of the stated campaign: establishment of a common repertoire and encouragement of community singing.
- 52 For the most part, MENC’s diagnosis of a singing deficiency was endorsed. Few writers challenged the basic thesis that singing has declined, and that young people “don’t know songs.” Like advocating Mom or apple pie, commentators found it easy to agree that more singing would be a good thing for America. An editorial writer in the *Des Moines Register* wrote: “We’re not going to go out on an editorial limb with this one but we’d like to endorse singing.”<sup>11</sup> “I would like to hear America singing,” said Former Education Secretary Bill Bennett, “(w)e have a lot of honking, cursing, and in-your-face behavior, but not enough singing.”<sup>12</sup>
- 53 Many newspapers ran a wire report with an account of children at an elementary school in Washington. They “recognized the titles of a dozen or so songs on the list, yet most had trouble singing more than a verse. ‘Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-aye,’ sixth-grader Shika Duncan sang as she sat on the school playground. ‘Oh—something, something—what a wonderful day’”.<sup>13</sup> “She, like many Americans, continued one version of the story, “can’t remember the words to songs that are an important part of this country’s culture.”<sup>14</sup>
- 54 The dearth of singing was blamed on a range of modern maladies, from teen pregnancy and low church attendance to lack of music education funding and use of drugs. “It may be that in the times we’re living in now, with so many teens having children and being so involved in survival, that the farthest thing from their minds is to sing to their babies,” says Frances Prince, vocal music teacher...and president of the District Music Educators Association.”<sup>15</sup>
- 55 Singing, argued many, took place in the past in settings which today either don’t exist, are not attended, or lack singing. Schmid was quoted as saying that “It used to be that children learned many of the songs...in school. But children don’t sing as much in school.”<sup>16</sup> In the *Washington Times*, a “local music educator” explained that (Church) is where a lot of singing is done with children,” Mrs. Prince says. “I’ll say to them ‘Didn’t you learn this in church and Sunday School?’ and they’ll say ‘I don’t go to church and Sunday school.’” Working mothers appeared implicitly and explicitly among the song-

eradicating forces. "Singing gets pushed out (of the school curriculum)," opined another music educator, "and then with both parents working, they just don't sing with the kids."<sup>17</sup> "I think the reason kids don't sing is there aren't enough people singing around them," Mrs. Prince says. "When people sing, most of the time they're happy. My mother sang when she was cooking or doing housework."<sup>18</sup>

- 56 Many respondents also found MENC's prescription to be appropriate. Former Education Secretary Bill Bennett said the list "looks like a core curriculum of American music."<sup>19</sup> A West Virginia editorial writer commented that she "liked the whole concept of picking a list of songs every child should know, akin to the value of books children should read. And I felt smug when I discovered that I had learned, and could still sing, a list of all of those selected songs."<sup>20</sup> A Providence, Rhode Island editorial found the list "...actually a pretty good one. At any rate, I was relieved to realize I had sung or at least knew must of the songs chosen (though I'm not sure I would recognize 'List Ev'ry Voice and Sing,' or 'Sakura')."<sup>21</sup>
- 57 Writers who lauded the list found that it, for example, "avoided... politically correct goofiness... (and) remained commendably out of step with the reformers who would purge from the nation's hymnals the rock-ribbed old hymns,"<sup>22</sup> and that the committee had "made an effort to be culturally inclusive"<sup>23</sup> "It's a surprising list that includes patriotic, religious, folk and country tunes – and it's refreshingly un-politically correct in some instances" wrote the Charleston editorialist. "You'll find a touch of Aaron Copland and Peter, Paul and Mary. There's a smidgeon of McCartney, a dab of Stephen Foster, a slice of Broadway and a healthy dose of references to God."<sup>24</sup>
- 58 A number of newspaper writers found experts in their own towns, whose claims were used to localize and bolster the wire service story quoted above, both in confirming the lack of singing and in affirming the value of the list.<sup>25</sup> For many, the importance of the song list was tied in with citizenship and patriotism: "They (children) should at least be familiar with (the songs)," one Maine music teacher was quoted as saying, "(t)hey don't have to believe them." "I've always felt that we need to stay close to patriotism," said her husband, another music teacher. "You'd be amazed at how many kids don't know the words to 'The Star-Spangled Banner. Music has a real place in patriotism.'" And a third Maine teacher added that "(m)aybe if children knew more of the songs that have to do with nationalism, they'd have a better appreciation of how lucky they are to be a part of this country."<sup>26</sup> For others, the patriotic agenda was off-putting. "Admittedly a righteous endeavor," averred a California writer. "Unfortunately they picked the wrong ones. Their choices were songs such as 'Amazing Grace,' And, 'America.' And, 'America, The Beautiful.' And, 'Battle Hymn of the Republic.' And 'God Bless America.' And 'God Bless the USA.' Sensing a pattern?" The writer suggested Buffalo Springfield's "For What It's Worth" as a "little reality check with your patriotism."<sup>27</sup>
- 59 Many who were not entirely convinced by the contents of the list still liked the idea of it. The most common strategy for these writers was to suggest additions to it. Typical of these writers was this from an Omaha editorial: "It would be easy – too easy – to find shortcomings in the list of 42 songs that the Music Educators National Conference says that every American should know...However, there's nothing wrong with the list that couldn't be corrected by lengthening it....Altogether it's not a bad start..." "So keep the list. Expand It."<sup>28</sup> And from a local music teacher in Maine: "It's not a perfect list but anything you do by committee isn't perfect"<sup>29</sup> "In this multicultural age, you're asking for trouble if you try to establish any sort of official canon. So you have to admire the Music Educators

National Conference's willingness to put its members' heads on the chopping block by publishing a list of '42 Songs Every American Should Know'" <sup>30</sup>

- 60 While such forgiving sentiments were typical, criticism abounded. Complaints about the list ranged from the mildly disapproving to the venomous. The list, complained writers, "does little to prepare students for an appreciation of classical music,"<sup>31</sup> features little that will "cater to younger audiences"<sup>32</sup>, and is "biased toward songs of patriotism and against songs of the sea."<sup>33</sup>
- 61 Many writers argued for longer lists: "Music teachers ought to know better. Americans dance to many different tunes; a list of 42 just isn't big enough to encompass them all."<sup>34</sup> The list was missing, among many alleged lacunae, war songs, songs representing religions other than Christianity and Judaism, Christmas Carols, Sinatra, Springsteen, "Yankee Doodle," and "We Shall Overcome," not to mention "I Wanna Be Sedated." An *Orlando Sentinel* letter writer was typical of many who wrote in suggesting the songs of their generation. Usually these were younger writers arguing for songs newer than The Beatles' "Yesterday," the list's most recent entry. In this case, a (presumably) older writer found the list indicative of the fact that "... America's golden era of music has degenerated into the "drug rock" music that prevails today. Perhaps the Music Educators National Conference should re-evaluate the 42 songs that Americans should know while there is still time to do so. <sup>35</sup>
- 62 Those who responded to the list often argued that it should be lengthened with additions suggested by the citizenry. "My major gripe with the ....list is it's woefully short. If Americans are to preserve their culture and heritage in song, the list needs to grow to about 4,042.....I suggest the music educators not only encourage Americans to sing, but that they expand their list by letting Americans add to it the songs they want to remember as part of their cultural experience and heritage. Such a list might educate the educators. <sup>36</sup>
- 63 Other writers took their criticism beyond mere additions to the list and expressed bafflement and disdain for it. "...Like so many efforts to find common intellectual and cultural ground, "said one, "the list leaves one wondering why, if these songs are so important to American cultural identity, are so many of them unfamiliar?"<sup>37</sup> The list was called "studiously uncontroversial,"<sup>38</sup> "boring," and "unmusical."<sup>39</sup> "I guarantee," wrote one *Chicago-Sun-Times* reader, "that many of these songs are unfamiliar to 95% of Americans. Proving my point, let me ask you and your readers, who represent a cross-section of ages and geographic regions, how many are familiar with the following "De Colores," "Dona Nobis Pacem," "Music Alone Shall Live," "Over My Head," "Sakura," "Shalom Chaverim," or Simple Gifts"? The columnist answered that "Yours is not the only letter in my mailbox regarding these "educators" and their goofy list...Based on the examples you quote, one might think this to be a list of songs "hardly anyone knows" rather than ones "every American should know." None cited were hits during this century."<sup>40</sup> Songs were not singled out only for their unfamiliarity; one writer expressed disgust at the "odious inclusion (of) 'God Bless the U.S.A.,' Lee Greenwood's awful Reagan-era paean to patriotism."<sup>41</sup> In a gesture echoed across the country and proposed by many writers, that columnist invited readers to "come up with better songs... show those stuffy educators how it's done. Send me your list of 10 songs that you think --and I'm going to change one crucial word here -- "most" Americans should know." Other newspapers<sup>42</sup> sought out local musicians or civilians for their own lists.



- 64 Some felt that the country's too-diverse musical tastes doom such lists: "The biggest challenge," wrote one "is this nation's musical tastes, which go more directions than a boxful of broken guitar strings. Grammys were awarded in 88 categories this year...Musically speaking, these people are not on the same page; these people are not in the same songbook. What are the chances you will find their fans sitting around the same campfire, singing 'I've Been Working On the Railroad.'? 'Zip...A -Dee-Doo-Dah.' (It's on the list, too.)"<sup>43</sup>
- 65 Occasionally, the credentials of the diagnostician were questioned along with the cure itself. Like the columnist above who called the educators "stuffy," some writers found the campaign high-handed. One called the list "The latest from the what-we-know-is-what-you-should-know department"<sup>44</sup> In Anchorage, a writer mocked the effort:
- If you need more evidence about the sad state of American education, all you have to do is read the list of songs that music teachers say every one of us should know... 'Songs that are part of our culture, part of who we are.' That's only true, I'm afraid, if who we are is people who can't dance...The list is, I don't know any other way to put this, totally lame....The music teachers ... welded together a roster of patriotic tunes...religious music...show tunes ...and folk music ... and decreed that these are the songs our children should learn. As if. But then, if it was fun, we wouldn't have to force the munchkins to learn it, would we? <sup>45</sup>
- 66 And Jim DeRogatis, senior editor of *Rolling Stone* magazine, was quoted in one widely-distributed version of the story. Along with his song suggestions, Public Enemy's "Fight the Power," and Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit," he added that "It seems to me that this group is pretty far out of touch with kids today if they think these are songs that will get them energized to sing...If you're going to put a Beatles song on, don't put 'Yesterday.' Kids don't want to sing 'Yesterday.' Put on 'Revolution.'"<sup>46</sup>
- 67 Perhaps the most basic question to be asked is about the primary assertion that singing has declined. In a voice decidedly in the minority, Professor Jere Humphreys, a renowned music education scholar at Arizona State University, challenged the "notion that musical life in, say, North America needs to be reenergized," arguing that, if you include listening, people are very active musically, and also opining concerning the MENC list that "singing is not for everyone, and certainly not those particular songs."<sup>47</sup>
- 68 Of course, it's this very emphasis on so-called "active" vs. so-called "passive" musical engagement that attracts fans of the list. One newspaper quoted a local music supervisor as "impressed by the national consensus behind the list and by its ...emphasis on active singing rather than passive listening."<sup>48</sup>
- 69 In 2004, I interviewed a class of third-graders in Farmington, Minnesota.<sup>49</sup> They filled out short questionnaires on which they were asked, among other things, about songs they knew "by heart," and about some places where they sing. Of the twenty-one students, eleven said they sang at home; eleven in music class; eleven reported singing at church; nine in their rooms; seven in cars, and two in the shower. The songs listed by the third-graders were a disparate lot. Many proved impossible for me to decipher (even after I had determined that quire, quier, and cwire all referred to "choir"), but among them: "Snow White Song," "The Drinkin' Bone," "Yankee Doodle," "Jingle Bells," "John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt," "ABC song," "Yellow Submarine," "Blue Suede Shoes," "Happy Birthday," "Three Blind Mice," "Pokemon #1," "Who Let the Dogs Out," "Twelve Days of Christmas," "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," "There's a Hole in the Bucket," "Joy to the World," and "Old MacDonald." Many students referred to popular songs and artists,



simply listing “Usher” and “Britney Spears” among their songs, noting “I know all of the songs from Martina McBride” or adding in “I love rock ‘n’ roll.”<sup>50</sup>

- 70 To be sure, my sample group is small here. But even this modest study is very informative. The students’ song repertoire is an amalgam of traditional and children’s songs, Christmas carols, and country and rock songs from several eras. There is evidence of diverse musical influences in the list. I interviewed the school’s music instructor, who, in answer to my question “Do you think children sing?” clarified “Not in school, on their own? Yes, I do.” When I asked for more detail about how she knows this, she said:

They come in and tell me. A lot of times it will be songs that are from here that they talk to me about, and they’ll say “I had this song stuck in my head and I just kept singing it all night long, you know, couldn’t get it out of my head” or, ...they sing along with the radio...(or) they’ll say “Oh yeah, I sing in church,” and share different songs that way, too. So yeah, I do.

- 71 She further added that she sees children teaching one another jump rope rhymes, that they learn songs from older siblings, and that they sing on bus trips, and in some non-specialist classrooms, especially in the lower grades.<sup>51</sup>

- 72 “When do you sing?” I also asked the students on the questionnaire. “I sing in music at 11:00” came one reply, but most answered me less literally. Here are their responses:

I sing once every day.  
When I have nothing to do  
Whenever I can  
Often  
I sing at music.  
Anytime almost  
I sing after school  
At church, at the radio and my CD player  
I sing anytime and anywhere  
I sing when I am happy  
I sung during the day. During the weekend.  
I sing anytime and at a birthday.  
After and at school.  
I sing at a birthday party and when I go caroling.  
Church.  
School time.  
I sing every day.  
When someone else starts to sing.  
At parties.  
I sing at church.  
In music class.

- 73 Here, too, this small group turns out to be very instructive. It’s clear that some students don’t sing much, with participation limited to church or school. Others sing “anytime almost” or “every day.” Some identify singing with particular settings (parties, church, caroling), while others seem to have a less restricted notion. Some singing, as I might well have expected from students who reported singing in their rooms or in a shower, seems to take place alone. But much sounds fundamentally social: parties, caroling, church, and “When someone else starts to sing.”

- 74 For all the doomsday talk about the disappearance of singing, though, some of their arguments made by MENC principals and in the press reveal that the split in opinion about U.S. musical culture is not just about active versus passive engagement. It is also about worthy and unworthy songs. These debates are fused together in many of the

discussions, but they are separable. The music supervisor for the Loudoun County (Virginia) Public Schools observed that "The common repertoire of songs we all enjoyed 20, 30 years ago is being lost. "If you go out on a field trip you won't even hear 'Ninety-nine bottles.'" If someone breaks out in song, it's apt to be something from MTV or that Madonna sings."<sup>52</sup> In praising the MENC list, one writer argued that "Songs pass along American culture, especially when countless hordes are mindlessly muttering the tunes of corporate television commercials."<sup>53</sup> Both Pete Seeger's foreword and Will Schmid's comments to the press mention television. The former mentions it as a source of addiction (and, perhaps not accidentally, he turns next to "polluted" to describe Americans), and the latter as a direct substitute for singing.

- 75 People singing television jingles or Madonna, however, are not the silent birds of Rachel Carson's pesticide-blighted spring. Their songs may be unwelcome, but they are songs. And they are being sung, albeit by polluted people. The Des Moines writer and the music supervisor are lamenting the repertoire itself, not the lack of singing. No less keen a cultural critic than Lisa Simpson has worried, after the family sings the "Armour Hot Dog" theme, 'Doesn't this family know any songs that aren't television commercials?'"<sup>54</sup>
- 76 Nor did it escape the attention of those who wrote about the MENC song list that the "natural" repertoire of Americans is drawn largely from television. "Every parent knows that what our children really learn are the songs from the latest movie-length Disney cartoon, plus the themes from the most violent Saturday morning kids TV programs."<sup>55</sup> One writer's alternative list, culled from members of the public, included the McDonald's theme "You Deserve a Break Today,"<sup>56</sup> and another suggested the "Flintstones" theme because "(y)ou know, of all these songs, the TV themes are the ones that probably will survive, just as predicted in the movie *Demolition Man*.<sup>57</sup> "Try a simple test," wrote one. "First, sing a few verses of 'Over My Head,' and 'Music Alone Shall Live.' Now sing 'My Baloney Has a First Name,' or the theme song to *Gilligan's Island*. Clearly, having a song in common is not a sufficient criterion for inclusion on the MENC list."<sup>58</sup>
- 77 The relationship between tunes people do know and those they "ought" to know, and the tension between the two, suffuses the MENC effort and reactions to it. While the MENC material stresses finding songs "people know" rather than those they "should know," its initial process reflected a desire to engineer, rather than discover, common repertoire. As the public reacted, MENC responded, to a degree. First, it added "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" to the second printing of the first, and second, it prepared a second volume<sup>59</sup> reflecting suggestions "solicited from music teachers all over the U.S. and (including) suggestions from the general public over the last four years."
- 78 On a larger level, the tension is between the musical culture we have and the one certain people think we should have: from the back of the *Get America Singing...Again!* songbook: "[U]se singing to bring people together once again in your neighborhood, home, church, camp, school, club, or activity...Throw in a song or two at the beginning of a meeting to melt the ice and get communication going....Get out the guitar, sit down at the piano, tune up the Autoharp, add a bass, drums, or any other instruments you can lay your hands on, and have a sing-along." These instructions point to a potential flaw in the diagnosis-prescription logic. If the "illness," as it were, is lack of singing, is a body of songs the appropriate cure? The instructions above suggest that what is lacking is not, or not only, repertoire but rather singing occasions, or occasions interpreted as appropriate for singing.

- 79 The self-described “non-singers” encountered by Schmid and others—I include the many I found in my own Illinois and Minnesota fieldwork—are very real. But as people reveal their paths to becoming non-singers, it is clear that a songbook will not change them into singers. Their non-singer status reflects deep-rooted personal and cultural conceptions about who should be singing, when, and where. The greatest challenge faced by the MENC list is contained not in the song list itself but in these instructions to sing, to make others sing, and to transform non-singing occasions into singing ones.
- 80 Among the dozens of times I have interviewed people who say they do not sing, or “don’t sing much,” fear of judgment figures prominently in their understanding of their own inhibition: “Do you ever sing,” I asked one Minnesota woman in 2004. “To the kids,” she answered, “And, you know, privately in the shower. I don’t actually sing for anybody. Well, sometimes I sing in church with the little kids...Kids...are not so judgmental.”<sup>60</sup> She went on to explain that she felt singing talent had passed her over, though others in her family were “good” singers. I also interviewed her friend, who said that she herself was “not a very good singer, but I sing because I know it’s important to kids.”<sup>61</sup>
- 81 More than one consultant has, ironically, cited a critical music teacher as an important silencing force, as in this interview segment with a man in his 50s:
- Yeah, well, I have an experience and I wanna say this was in about 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade, but it’s, I can still picture it, I mean it’s incredible I can picture being in this gym... there’s this chorus that’s basically made up of everybody, you know, it wasn’t select... and basically what the teacher did is she, you know, she had us singing and she started weeding people out that she didn’t think could sing and I was weeded out very early and that was sort of the end of, not that the singing career was ever a much of a prospect, but you never know...it definitely made me self-conscious, and I think of myself as someone who can sing on his own, reasonably well, you know, I’m not a great voice by any means, but I can carry a tune most of the time, on my own. But I definitely, and I don’t know whether it’s the chicken-egg, or what it is, but in collective singing situations, I’m uncomfortable, self-conscious, feel like I can’t quite carry the tune, even if I could carry the tune perfectly well.<sup>62</sup>
- 82 In a hopeful sign for singing advocates, all three of these consultants expressed a willingness to let the importance of social function override their inhibitions.
- 83 In sharing its dismay at U.S. musical culture, and advancing its vision of a more ideal one, the Music Educators National Conference created a comparatively rare opportunity for Americans to reflect on the state of their musical culture, and particularly on the role of active singing. In responding, Americans expressed agreement with some contentions and argued with others, allowing observers to discover points of consensus and contention among these cultural participants. Some in this debate argued that the U.S. lacked songs, others that we lacked singers, and still others that we lacked singing occasions; accordingly, songs, autoharps, or calls to song were prescribed. The multiple prescriptions and prognoses offered by these confident diagnosticians obscure the fact that we have yet to determine whether, and how, the patient is actually suffering.

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NOTES

1. I thank Carleton College for its generous funding of this research project, and my colleagues for their sustained interest in it. I also thank my students, whose participation in assignments and discussions exploring the state of singing in the U.S. has stimulated my own thinking. And I thank my many consultants for their frank discussions of their own musical lives and for their patience with my questions.
2. Will Schmid, "All The Best," *Music Educators Journal* 82 (May 1995): 4-5 +54.
3. See Music Educators National Conference, *Get America Singing... Again!* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 1996).
4. This advertisement was so popular in the U.S. in 1971 that radio stations reportedly received calls to play the ad's song, "I'd like to buy the world a Coke." Two versions, one by the Hillside Singers and the other by the New Seekers, and with the lyrics "I'd like to teach the world to sing" were in Billboard's Top Twenty that year. The ad, and the story of its construction, can be seen at the Library of Congress website: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ccmphtml/index.html>
5. "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" was added after the first printing, reportedly after complaints from the Baseball Hall of Fame.
6. Music Educators National Conference, *Get America Singing... Again!*, 5.
7. It's not entirely clear whether this was a good strategy. To the extent the list was viewed as the old telling the young what to do, Seeger could only amplify that. The marriage of this list of would-be "folk songs" with a vintage "folksinger" heavily identified with leftist politics was an uneasy one. *The Washington Times* reported that "America's best loved commie, Pete Seeger, whose leftist propaganda songs earned him a Kennedy Center Honors award from President Clinton, now is seeking congressional support in getting America to sing again... 'I was struck by how out of touch these people must be if they thought that a Republican Congress would be moved by the blatherings of an unrepentant shill for Stalin,' says one high-ranking congressional official." John McCaslin, "All Together Now," *The Washington Times*, 6 March, 1997, A5.
8. Music Educators National Conference, *Get America Singing... Again!*, 5.
9. Carol Innerst, "A Notable Effort for Children," *The Washington Times*, 20 May 1996, C:8.
10. "The version of the list released to the press did not contain "Take Me Out to the Ball Game"
11. Staff, "Let's Hear It for Song," *Des Moines Register*, 27 April, 1996, 8.
12. Staff, Wire Reports, "Music Educators Tout Tunes to Retain Culture," *Houston Chronicle*, 19 April, 1996, 4.
13. Ibid.
14. Associated Press, "Educators: U.S. Should Know Songs," *The Cincinnati Post*, 19 April 1996, 4.

15. Innerst, "Notable," C: 8.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Staff, Wire Reports, "Music Educators Tout," 4.
20. Cheryl Caswell, "My Turn: May the Melodies Linger On," *Charleston Daily Mail*, 24 April, 1996, 1D.
21. N.A., "List tests Americans' song I.Q.," *The Providence Journal-Bulletin*, 18 May 1996, 11A.
22. N.A. (editorial), "Indeed, Keep the Music Alive," *The Omaha World-Herald*, 22 April, 1996, 14.
23. Philip Kennicott, "Votes for notes: Music Educators Left a Number of Worthy Selections off their List of Essential Music for Americans, According to Some Local Musicians and Aficionados" *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 9 May 9, 1996, 1G.
24. Caswell, "My Turn," 1D.
25. See, for example, the *Bangor Daily News* and Kennicott articles.
26. Staff, Wire Reports, "I Hear America Singing...Music Educators seek to preserve 42 songs," *Bangor Daily News* (Maine), 3 May, 1996, B6.
27. Wayne Lockwood, "The Other Songs Americans Should Know," *The Orange County Register*, 27 May, 1996, E6.
28. N.A. (editorial), "Indeed," 14.
29. Staff, Wire Reports, "I Hear America Singing," B6.
30. David Menconi, "You oughtta know these songs, educators say, but they seem to have missed some key tunes." *News and Observer* (Raleigh, NC), 29 April, 1996, D1.
31. Kennicott, "Votes," 1G.
32. Ibid.
33. Allan R. Andrews, "What Americans Sing," *Pacific Stars and Stripes* (Tokyo, Japan), 19 May, 1996, n.p.
34. Tom Vogt, "I Could Name That Tune But I Won't," *The Columbian* (Washington), 3 May, 1996, A8.
35. Phil Brewer, "Music's Golden Era," letter to the editor, *Orlando Sentinel* 4 May, 1996, A20
36. Andrews, "What Americans Sing," n.p.
37. Kennicott, "Votes," 1G.
38. Ibid.
39. Mike Doogan, "If you want kids to learn music, it's time to rock the schoolhouse," *Anchorage Daily News*, 23 April, 1996, B1.
40. Jerry Osborne, Educators' List of Must-Know Songs Baffles Many Readers," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 24 May, 1996, 14.
41. David Menconi, "You oughtta know," D1. Menconi goes on to quote Schmid as saying that "Sometimes, the question came down to what we could get the rights to. Hal Leonard is the publisher of that one, and they said it's their most popular country song. Choral directors were not so hot on that one, but the barbershop quartet people loved it." Not coincidentally, adds Menconi, Hal Leonard is also the publisher of the MENC songbook.

42. See, for example, the Kennicott article, in which local St. Louisans ranging from Leonard Slatkin to a local restaurant promoter, contributed their ideas.
43. Tom Vogt, "I Could Name," A8.
44. Kennicott, "Votes," 1G.
45. Doogan, "If you want," B1.
46. Deb Riechmann, "Name That Tune: Picking 42 for Posterity," *The Star-Ledger* (Newark, NJ), 21 April, 1996, 18. Caswell responds to this quotation: "Poor Jim. Hasn't he been to a scout camp, 4-H meeting, Sunday School or daycare lately? Because that's where kids are still singing—and loving—many of the songs on the list."
47. Jere Humphreys, "...On teaching Pigs to Sing," Paper published on the MayDay Group website: <http://maydaygroup.org/php/resources/colloquia/VII-humphreys-reenergizing.php>. 1 June, 1999.
48. Staff, "Let's Hear It," 8.
49. My thanks to Sue Rodman and her third graders for their good humor and patience with my questions.
50. I have also long administered an assignment to my college students concerning memorized repertoire, and the lists that they generate have much in common with those of the third-graders.
51. Doris MacNamara interview, May 3, 2004
52. Innerst, "Notable," C: 8.
53. Staff, "Let's Hear It," 8.
54. In the "Lady Bouvier's Lover" episode, Bart and Lisa are depicted doing a song and dance routine to the Armour Hot Dogs commercial jingle. Towards its conclusion, the entire family joins in. After it ends, Lisa asks her question, and after a moment of silent contemplation, the entire family begins singing the "Chicken Tonight" jingle, dancing around the table.
55. Doogan, "If you want," B1.
56. Kennicott, "Votes," 1G.
57. Lockwood, "The Other Songs," E6.
58. Kennicott, "Votes," 1G.
59. See Music Educators National Conference, *Get America Singing... Again! Volume 2* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2000). Interestingly, its cover features an illustration similar to that of the first volume, with a large American flag and a group of five people, mouths open in song. The focus is tighter, so that it's unclear whether people are on a hill, and only their upper bodies are visible. The implied ethnicities are more varied, with some darker skin tones and facial hair.
60. Interview with Ann VandeGraff, 9/24/2004
61. Interview with Cathy Ryback, October 12, 2004
62. Interview with Robert Jefferson, October 25, 2004

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AUTHOR

**MELINDA RUSSELL**

Carleton College